
Musings on the Monarchy and the passing of HM QE II

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The events that unfurled in the UK and around the world following the announcement from the Royal household on September 8, 2022, were of a scale hitherto unwitnessed in recent times. Before the cartoonists and their followers on the Twitter sphere had time to milk the maximum footage from the apparent exchange between the Queen and her 15th prime minister (rumoured to include a reference to their names- one Liz to another) came to the grim announcement that the Queen had died peacefully at Balmoral Castle. When she missed the Privy Council meeting the day before, online, and the palace announced that her doctors had advised her to rest, many had started predicting the worst. On the day, as the BBC presenters changed to a dark theme and the nation's mood became sombre, we feared the worst. In between seeing patients in the clinic, eyebrows were raised, and furtive glances were exchanged as we waited for the inevitable.

There is a finality in the announcement that the Queen has died. We in the healthcare profession know this for sure and encourage people to accept the inevitable, to remain brave and when counselling, advise the bereaved to focus on the good times that have come, the life and achievements of the deceased. When the whole

nation (or the vast majority as far as we know) are grieving, who do you turn to for comfort?

Death is often described as the only truth in the world by some. Those less poetic often equate the purpose of life with the end goal. Indeed, poets such as Rabindranath Tagore consider death to be the extinguishing of a candle and the harbinger of a new dawn. Growing up as children in a newly independent India, our parents learnt of the new dawn that had arrived but with much pain, anguish and destruction of millions of innocent lives due to the ill-planned partition of India. Yet, soon after, the crown was thrust upon a young princess as Queen Elizabeth II was coronated. She had little preparation for the role of a monarch of an empire that was going through the pangs of giving birth to independent nations.

The Commonwealth was born to preserve the legacy of the empire, and many were not entirely enamoured by what the empire had done to its subjects. There were deep wounds to reckon with, a legacy that stretched over centuries of injustice, slavery, indenture, stories of trust and betrayal, of torture and repression and financial ruin as vast amounts of wealth were unfairly taken from the dominions.

The young Queen faced the unique challenge of having to come of her own while the gargantuan Commonwealth came into being. The Commonwealth was not the league of nations, nor could it be built in the aftermath of the World Wars; it had a different history. There was so much hurt in the world that it would have been natural for most countries that gained freedom from the Crown to violently reject any reference to the crown and shun everything associated with it. Yet, the opposite happened, and one wonders why?

In the next 70 years of her reign, Queen Elizabeth II visited over 120 countries. She managed to keep the Commonwealth of independent nations maintaining a connection with their shared history and their destiny, their virtual allegiance to the crown. Many post-colonial authors, historians, politicians and economists pointed out how the empire has destroyed centuries of potential growth, crippling financial ruin, the enormity of the human tragedy of slavery and indenture, and the terrible wounds of partition. Yet, the populace in the Commonwealth chose not to identify Queen Elizabeth II personally with any of these injustices.

To them, she was the embodiment of hope and glory, the nearest they could come to the promise. It is true that, as humans, many of us find comfort in the belief that we are not alone in times of our deepest despair and desperation; what keeps us going is the faith that there is someone above who will deliver us through our darkest hour. Growing up in a scientific household, one has learned to question, observe, and rationalise. When visiting majestic temples, churches and grandiose mosques, one has often wondered what brings people to have faith in one that cannot be seen, heard, touched or experienced by application of any of our senses. Nor can be predicted or calculated by the application of scientific principles. What drives the creation of such masterpieces as Abu Simbel, the Inca places of worship, the cave paintings of Ajanta, the Buddha of Bamiyan, the Greek

temple of Apollo and the Sistine chapel? As humans, we need a scaffolding with which to structure our lives, to make sense of the world around us and perhaps religion offers us that which brings peace to the soul.

There is no denying that however far back one cares to look in what can be gleaned from human history, there are clear examples of belief in such that we refer to as Gods, Goddesses or Holy spirits. This is not a treatise on religion, nor has the author any knowledge or authority to write about such elan ethereal subject matter. It is merely personal speculation on why a hereditary monarchy still captures the imagination of the vast majority of the populace, at least in the UK (if regular polls on the monarchy are to be trusted) and elsewhere in the world, within and beyond the virtual reach of the Commonwealth.

Queen Elizabeth II believed in divine right. Her divine right to be the rightful monarch and her duty to God and country. She took her duty seriously and delivered with sincerity that can only come from absolute belief. Yet, in 1649, Oliver Cromwell deposed the then King, removed the divine right to rule and established Parliamentary sovereignty. Even when King Charles II was restored as King of England in 1660, the divine right to rule was only returned nominally and severely restricted to only a virtual function at the mercy of the elected members of the House of Commons.

Throughout her long reign, the country, its intelligentsia, its people through their representatives and her erstwhile subjects across the Commonwealth have grappled with the role of the hereditary monarchy and the sanctity of the divine right to the throne. Somewhat remarkably, Queen Elizabeth II managed to keep herself endeared to her public, to keep her head above such controversies with the monarchy debate, and even when a severe challenge was presented in her personal household, she remained steadfast in her own resolve, her divine duty and steered the monarchy away from

choppy waters. It is her personal legacy that the monarchy has survived to this day but, as is visible from the outpouring of public grief and affection, has gained immensely in strength.

As she lies in state in Westminster Palace, the queue stretches to 5 miles, and her subjects wait over 24 hours to pay their respect to her departed soul. They come, old and young, people of all colour, all religions and they file past her in silence, in solemnity and offer their affection. Some just want to be in her presence; not many have had the chance to be so close to her mortal self before as they do now.

Some of us are incredibly lucky to be invited to the funeral service in Westminster Abbey. A selection of people receiving her birthday honours is invited to share on the solemn occasion. As an Indian at heart and British by choice, having dedicated the best part of one's blood, sweat, toil and enterprise to Britain, one has to make sense of why this is such a privilege. The more I read of her reign, the more I try to make sense of the terrible injustices that are a direct consequence of the empire; one cannot associate Queen Elizabeth II personally with any of that. I find myself unknowingly shedding many tears as I think of her dedication to duty, of not taking a single false step all her life, except perhaps misjudging the affection that Diana commanded among her loyal subjects.

I can only feel love, affection and massive respect for her exemplary life in public and private. Yes, she did not once acknowledge nor apologise for the historic injustices carried out in the name of the crown before her time and also, as some will point out, during her reign. Perhaps she could have done more, engaged with her subjects, influenced some of her 15 premiers to change the course of history for her Commonwealth subjects, and offered reparation. Perhaps, the new King will change her hands-off approach to politics and engage with justice for humanity and climate change. It is a double-edged sword, as engagement may allow the

Commons to remove the last vestiges of the monarchy if one loses step with the mood of the public. As we watch the outpouring of affection, the nearly million people who are predicted to file past her coffin, and billions more who watch around the world, one cannot help but wonder that the best lesson for the new King has to be the masterclass that Queen Elizabeth II demonstrated through her life.

May her soul rest in peace. Long live the King.